

SALUTE TO HONOREE: **First Lady Laura Bush**

Thank you very, very much, Charlayne. Her Excellency, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, President of Liberia, it's great to have this opportunity to be with you. I'm thrilled to have the chance to see you, and I want to wish you and your family, who are all here, a warm welcome to Washington.

I also want to recognize the President of Africare, Julius Coles; the Acting Administrator for USAID, Henrietta Fore. Ambassador Mark Dybul, who is the U.S. Global AIDS Coordinator, is here tonight. Where's Mark? Way over there. Thank you, Mark. Ambassador Jendayi Frazer, the Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs is also here.

Members of the diplomatic corps, members of Congress, distinguished guests, over the last three and a half decades, Africare has improved millions of lives across the continent of Africa. Africare programs provide emergency relief and safe drinking water. They feed the hungry. They clean up the natural environment. Your organization supports literacy training, develops civic institutions, and promotes good government. Since 1970, Africare has delivered more than \$675 million in aid to 36 different countries.

Africare is one of several relief organizations that make up the RAPIDS consortium. RAPIDS is addressing one of the greatest humanitarian crises of all times, and that's the epidemic of HIV/AIDS. I've seen the benefits of this work first-hand in Zambia's Mututa Memorial Clinic. With support from RAPIDS and the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, the clinic helps Zambians live positively with HIV.

And as we just saw from the video -- did you all see the video? Okay, then I'll tell you what's going to be in it. (Laughter.) Africare works to improve opportunities for women and girls. Tonight, you're advancing this goal by honoring an outstanding African woman who's a role model for girls everywhere: President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf.

President Johnson-Sirleaf is one of the world's most distinguished leaders. She's a respected economist, an accomplished public servant, and an amazing woman. Through her service as a Liberian cabinet minister in the 1970s, as a senior U.N. administrator in the 1990s, and now as her country's President, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf has always been deeply devoted to her nation.

Her dedication to Liberia has never diminished -- not even in the face of persecution. When she opposed the military rule of Samuel Doe, President Johnson-Sirleaf was imprisoned and eventually had to flee her country. During all her years in exile, she never lost her love of freedom and her commitment to restoring democracy in Liberia.

I've just come from the National Museum of African American History and Culture's opening exhibit, entitled "Let Your Motto Be Resistance." The title of this photograph display comes from a speech by an African-American clergyman and abolitionist named Henry Highland Garnet, whose portrait is part of the exhibit. Garnet championed the idea

of Liberia -- of an African nation where former slaves could live in freedom. He was eventually appointed "Minister Resident" to the Republic of Liberia.

Before he left the United States, Garnet prayed: "Please the Lord I can only safely cross the ocean, land on the coast of Africa, look around upon its green fields, tread the soil of my ancestors, live if but a few weeks; then I shall be glad to lie down and be buried beneath its sod." Shortly after he arrived in Monrovia, Garnet died, and was given a state funeral by the Liberian government.

The story of Henry Highland Garnet represents the very special and close relationship between Liberia and the United States. For many years, Liberia flourished as one of the most successful countries in Africa, before its long and devastating civil war. During the war, the United States was one of the few nations that maintained a diplomatic presence, because we wanted to work with Liberians so they could return to their democratic ideals.

Now the people of the United States stand with President Johnson-Sirleaf and the people of Liberia as they rebuild their country. We commend the President's efforts to make Liberia's government more transparent and to build up democratic institutions. As a former teacher, I especially appreciate President Johnson-Sirleaf's commitment to free and compulsory primary education. The result has been a dramatic increase in school enrollment -- especially for girls.

President Johnson-Sirleaf has worked to get Liberia's education plan approved by the Education For All-Fast Track program. Under the President's plan, more students will have basic school supplies like desks, chairs, and textbooks. Teachers will be trained to use up-to-date instructional materials. Currently, 26 percent of Liberia's schools have access to clean water -- and President Johnson-Sirleaf aims to increase that number to 60 percent by 2010.

These are ambitious goals -- and the United States is proud to work with President Johnson-Sirleaf to achieve them. Last month, I announced that the United States will partner with Liberia through our government's new Basic Education Initiative. Liberia is one of six Fast Track countries that will receive \$425 million to train teachers and improve literacy. The goal of the Basic Education Initiative is to reach 4 million children over the next five years, and to support countries that make education a priority -- countries like Liberia.

Since the end of Liberia's civil war, the United States has provided more than \$650 million for humanitarian, development, and security assistance. We're helping recruit and train and equip Liberian security forces. We're working with President Johnson-Sirleaf's government to build up a system of law and justice. Liberia's farmlands and forests support the livelihoods of 70 percent of that nation's people -- so the United States has joined with President Johnson-Sirleaf to promote responsible stewardship of Liberia's natural resources and to expand access to global markets for Liberian farmers.

President Johnson-Sirleaf is working to rebuild a health care infrastructure that suffers from years of neglect. The United States is partnering with her government to support health clinics and to provide preventive care in rural communities. Next year, Liberia will receive \$1 million from the Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief. Liberia is also a focus

country under the President's Malaria Initiative, a \$1.2 billion program that aims to reduce malaria deaths in 15 African nations by over half in the next five years.

Many American people also want to help Liberia through charities and faith-based congregations and organizations. Liberians need books and school supplies, medical equipment, clothing, food, and agricultural commodities. Americans can provide resources for all of these items through charities that invest in Liberian education, health care, and agriculture. Concerned citizens can support the humanitarian work of their faith congregations by providing donations, serving as volunteers, or going on mission trips.

Last year, I met a young teacher in Indiana named Carrie Cannon. When Carrie and her husband learned that they couldn't have children, they decided to adopt. Their prayers were answered by three beautiful children: five-year-old Abraham, three-year-old Alexa, and baby Addison -- all from the same Liberian family.

While Carrie and Adam waited for their adoption paperwork to clear, they got to know their children long-distance through photographs and letters. Through those letters and photos, the Cannons also learned about the profound need of the Liberian people. Carrie wanted to give back to the country that was giving her her family. As a teacher, she knew that building Liberia's first library was a good place to start.

At her school, Carrie organized a book drive with the goal of collecting 10,000 books. The drive quickly spread to two other schools. Students walked the streets asking their neighbors for donations. Community groups and local businesses pitched in. By the end of the drive, Carrie's project had collected more than 65,000 books for the people of Liberia.

Carrie hopes other communities will launch similar aid projects, but there's one dream she cherishes more. Someday, when Abraham and Alexa and Addison are older, Carrie wants her children to meet one of her personal heroes -- President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf.

I was privileged to represent the United States at President Johnson-Sirleaf's inauguration. At the ceremony in Monrovia, she delivered a moving address that spoke directly to the women of Liberia, of Africa, and of the world. President Johnson-Sirleaf is the first woman ever elected president in Africa, and women around the world are proud of her.

And we have every reason to be proud of her: President Johnson-Sirleaf is where she is today because of her hard work, her faith in democracy, and her belief in the power of education. She's an inspiration to everyone who believes in free societies. President Johnson-Sirleaf, congratulations on this well-deserved award.

And special thanks to Africare for honoring President Johnson-Sirleaf, and for your terrific work to improve the lives of men, women and children across the continent of Africa.

Thank you all very much.